

An Enlightening Journey

By JIM SCHNEIDER

Club President, North Oaks Golf Club

My first month as president of North Oaks Golf Club has been an enlightening journey. Although I am not an agronomist, I now know more about grass on a golf course than 99% of the golfers in the Upper Midwest. I have read numerous articles, met with representatives of the MGA, and attended a seminar with the USGA Senior Agronomist for the North Central Region. I have seen slideshows depicting the damage to greens and fairways in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan. I have discussed course conditions and state of greens and fairways with presidents and vice-presidents of most of the major Twin Cities private golf clubs. This month's President's Report hopefully will convey to the membership what I absorbed from all of these resources.

It's the Grass

First and foremost, it's the grass. Poa annua grass is the culprit. This dominant bluegrass in an old-fashioned Minnesota winter with lots of snow and normal temperatures will be a hearty viable plant in the spring. The problem is lack of snow cover and extreme temperature variations causing thawing and refreezing. This process kills Poa annua grass. This last winter was a Poa annua grass-killer not only in Minnesota but in the entire Upper Midwest. This spring, greens and fairways in Michigan and Wisconsin were many times in worse condition than greens and fairways at North Oaks Golf Club.

Bentgrass

The so-called good grass is Bentgrass. Bentgrass is very hearty and can survive

even a 2004-2005 Minnesota winter. The new courses around town including Troy Burne, Spring Hill and TPC of the Twin Cities are all Bentgrass golf courses. North Oaks unfortunately is primarily Poa annua grass and will remain primarily Poa annua grass no matter how often we overseed with Bentgrass. Poa annua grass will always outgrow Bentgrass when they exist in the same soil. That is why a club like Spring Hill (100% Bentgrass) has your golf shoes cleaned by their locker room attendant before you are allowed to play as a guest. Their fear is that your golf shoes might contain Poa annua grass seeds which would then take hold on their course and eventually spread over the

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entire course. Clearly, Bentgrass courses don't want *Poa annua* grass. It reminds me of the Eurasian Milfoil problem in Minnesota lakes. The Minnesota DNR requires you to check your boats, motors and livewells after taking your boat out of the lake so as not to spread the Milfoil menace to the next lake that you put your boat in.

Grass Length

Length of grass is also a very important consideration. Long grass winters well. (See our roughs.) Fairways that are cut short suffer damage in a bad winter. (See our fairways.) Greens that are cut very short sustain the worst damage. (See pictures of our greens in early April.) Jack MacKenzie, our Green Superintendent, can give you the technical reasons why length of grass is critical. The bottom line however is that the shorter the grass is when winter sets in determines how susceptible the grass is to damage in the

spring. That is one reason why it is problematic to cut the greens after October 15. That extra grass height might be the difference between damaged greens and healthy greens the next spring.

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Green Covers

Green covers have also been a major topic of conversation. There is simply no consensus regarding green covers. Two years ago Rolling Green and Minikahda used new green covers on some of their greens only to find those greens dead in the spring while uncovered greens were fine. This year some courses that used covers had good greens while other courses like Rolling Green again experimented with covers only to find dead greens when the covers were removed. Different covers produce different results depend-

ing on the type of winter. A certain green cover will work in a mild winter while another green cover would work better in a harsh winter. Unfortunately, golf course superintendents and green committees cannot predict what type of winter we are going to have to determine if a cover should be used and what type of cover would be the best choice.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that a golf course is susceptible to winter kill no matter what is done in the fall because you cannot predict the winter. The job of the superintendent and the Green Committee is to make decisions based on the best information available to them each fall. We have an excellent green superintendent, and a knowledgeable Green Committee. Your Board of Directors working with the green superintendent and the Green Committee will make the best decision possible for the turf at North Oaks Golf Club. Mother Nature will grade us next spring on our efforts. See you on the course.



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